

Living a Meaningful Life

Cast Your Bread upon the Waters

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

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Scripture

In his quest to find out how to live a meaningful life the writer of Ecclesiastes urges his readers not to be paralyzed by their lack of knowledge but to use every opportunity to work boldly but wisely for the glory of God.

Let us read Ecclesiastes 11:1-6:

¹ **Cast your bread upon the waters,
for you will find it after many days.**

² **Give a portion to seven, or even to eight,
for you know not what disaster
may happen on earth.**

³ **If the clouds are full of rain,
they empty themselves on the earth,
and if a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls,
there it will lie.**

⁴ **He who observes the wind will not sow,
and he who regards the clouds
will not reap.**

⁵ **As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the
bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know
the work of God who makes everything.**

⁶ **In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold
not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or
that, or whether both alike will be good. (Ecclesiastes 11:1-6)**

Introduction

Do you ever wonder if anything you do for God really matters? You pray for a friend, but does your prayer ever get answered? You give money to help the poor, but does it really help

them? You give money to the church, but does it change lives? You share the gospel, but does anyone get saved? Sometimes you wonder if what you do for God and his kingdom really matters.

But then there are times when you catch a glimpse of what God is doing, when you see that something you did for Jesus really did make a difference in someone's life. When I was an associate pastor many years ago a couple started attending worship services. We quickly learned that Angela (not her real name), who was in her late 40s, had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. My wife, Eileen, befriended Angela and after a while shared the gospel with her. "Angela was ripe for the picking!" said Eileen, as Angela immediately trusted Christ. I had the privilege of baptizing Angela several weeks later, just days before she died and went to be with her Savior. At the funeral Eileen learned that Angela's aunt had been praying for Angela to become a Christian for more than 35 years! What a joy it was for her to see that something she did for Jesus really did—eventually—make a difference in someone's life.

Even though we do not know how God will use our work to advance his kingdom, we should continue to pray, continue to serve, continue to give, and continue to share, "knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58b).

The writer of Ecclesiastes, known as Qoheleth or the Preacher, takes this perspective in Ecclesiastes 11:1-6, where he urges his readers not to be paralyzed by their lack of knowledge but to use every opportunity to work boldly but wisely for the glory of God.

Lesson

Similarly, in today's lesson, then, we are urged not to be paralyzed by our lack of knowledge but to use every opportunity to work boldly but wisely for the glory of God.

I. Take Action (11:1-2)

The first point the Preacher makes is this: take action!

He commands in Ecclesiastes 11:1, **“Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.”**

Now, what exactly does this somewhat strange command mean? Is the Preacher saying that you should toss a loaf of **bread upon the waters**? We know that a loaf of bread will simply sink to the bottom. We are not going to **find it after many days**.

A number of interpretations have been proposed. One interpretation is that the Preacher is encouraging us to be generous to the poor. Bread **“cast . . . upon the waters”** is sharing with someone who needs help. The point is that if we are generous with others when they are in need, eventually we ourselves will get help when we are in need.

Another interpretation is that the Preacher is referring to seed sown in a floodplain. Commentator Charles Bridges used the annual flooding of the Nile as an example: “The time for sowing the seed is just when the waters are going down, leaving a loamy bed, in which the seed apparently lost is deposited, and produces a most luxuriant harvest.”¹ The point here is that the farmer gets a good return for sowing his seed.

While both of these interpretations are plausible, it seems to me that the most likely interpretation is that the Preacher is referring to engaging in trade. He is urging action with regard to sending bread, grain, or other produce to other destinations via the waters (such as the sea or rivers), and then waiting for a return of money or other goods upon the return of the vessels. And so to **“find it after many days”** is to receive the reward that comes with taking the risk of a wise investment. As we say today, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

Verse 2 makes a similar but slightly different point. The Preacher commands, **“Give a portion to seven, or even to eight.”** This is another way of saying, “Do not put all your eggs in one basket.” In the investment world, this would be called “diversifying your portfolio.” Rather than putting all your money into one

¹ Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (1860; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961), 263.

investment, put it into several.

And the reason for diversifying is simple, says the Preacher, **“For you know not what disaster may happen on earth.”** No one knows what **disaster may happen on earth**. It is just smart business to diversify your portfolio.

Several years ago I put in a request to transfer a significant amount of money into a different account. I faxed my request in at about 10 p.m. on a Monday evening. The financial institution would have received my application the next morning. They would then fix the amount to be transferred at the close of business on Tuesday. Well, the next day was 9/11 and by the end of the day my investment was virtually worthless. I certainly did **not know what disaster may happen on earth!**

The Preacher is urging his readers to take action with regard to business. He is urging his readers to diversify their investments.

So, how do we apply this sound financial advice to the spiritual business of God’s kingdom? You and I need to take action to invest in the kingdom of God. We need to invest our time, our talent, and our treasure in God’s kingdom.

God wants us to take action and get involved in expanding his kingdom. He wants us to spread our time, talent, and treasure into different opportunities. Some of the things we attempt may fail (or at least seem to fail at the time). We may try to start a church, and it may not get off the ground. We may try to start a ministry, and it may not get traction. We may try to share the gospel with someone, and it may seem as if the gospel seed has fallen on rocky soil. But we should never become discouraged and do nothing.

So, let me encourage you—no, command you, as the Preacher does!—to take action and invest your time, talent, and treasure in kingdom ministry.

II. Beware of Inaction (11:3-4)

Second, the Preacher warns against inaction.

He warns what will happen if we do not obey the commands in verse 1-2. If we do not take action and get involved, we will never do any productive work that will yield a harvest. And this is as true in the spiritual realm as it is in the business realm.

To show this, the Preacher pictures a farmer standing out in his field. The clouds are heavy with rain—part of a familiar cycle in nature. Nearby a tree has fallen to the ground because the wind has blown it down. The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 11:3, **“If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.”** There is nothing that the farmer can do about either the rain or the wind. They are part of the normal cycle of nature.

But the one thing that the farmer can control is when he will sow his seed and harvest his crops. But this particular farmer is just standing there, as the Preacher says in verse 4, **“He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.”**

The farmer is waiting for ideal conditions. He knows that if it is very windy, the seed will scatter with the wind and will not fall into the ground. He also knows that a rain storm could ruin his harvesting of the crops. And so he is paralyzed, waiting for ideal conditions.

By showing us this farmer, the Preacher is warning against inaction. In the business or agricultural realm people sometimes wait for ideal conditions in order to act. And they often miss opportunities.

In applying this spiritually, I want to warn you against inaction. Rather than watching the wind and the clouds, rather than watching the potential obstacles and difficulties, rather than waiting for the ideal time, do what you can with what God has given you in your life. Pursue the dream you believe that God has given for your calling in your life. Get actively involved in ministry. Don't sit on the sidelines. Show mercy to someone in need. Start a friendship with a neighbor, and pray that God will use that rela-

tionship to lead your neighbor to Christ.

Don't use the excuse that you are too busy to get involved in kingdom ministry. Don't use the excuse that you don't have spiritual gifts to get involved in kingdom ministry. Don't use the excuse that you are too young or too old to get involved in kingdom ministry. I know one dear saint who is in her eighth decade of life, and she has about six children in her neighborhood come over to her home each week for a children's Bible study.

Do not hold back because of fear, age, time, gifts, whatever, but step out in faith—not faith that your own efforts will succeed, necessarily, but faith that God will take what you offer and use it in some way for his glory.

III. Recognize the Providence of God (11:5)

Next, the Preacher tells us to recognize the providence of God.

He says in verse 5, **“As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.”**

The Preacher is simply saying that we do not know how life comes into existence. Oh, we know that God is the author of life. And we know something of the physical mechanics of the process. But, we do not know exactly how life is created. That belongs to the domain of God.

And just as do not know how God creates life, so we do not know how God is at work in this world. Yes, there are certain “laws of nature” so that we have some stability in this world. Imagine if our world was utterly random; it would be completely chaotic. But, God has set certain laws into motion which govern how this world operates. Still, there is an almost infinite amount of knowledge about how God works that we do not know.

Consider God's work in creation. In 2004 the Hubble Space Telescope photographed a tiny sliver of space through prolonged exposures that lasted for more than eleven days. Then astronomers

counted the number of galaxies in the photograph. In that one little subsection of the universe, there were ten thousand galaxies, each one containing one hundred billion stars. Who can explain how all those stars came into being?

Or go to the other end of the scale, where scientists are trying to discover tangible evidence for the “last” atomic particle, the Higgs boson. Yet as soon as they observe it—if they ever do—they will wonder if there is something even smaller.

Truly, God “does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number” (Job 5:9). The entire universe is full of mysteries, from inside the atom to the farthest star in space and everything in between.

What God does in our own lives is no less mysterious. Why did he take something away that we were hoping to keep? Why did he give us something that we never wanted? Why do our prayers go unanswered? Why do our dreams go unfulfilled?

But there are other mysteries, including the mystery of our own salvation. What made Jesus willing to suffer and die for our sins, bearing our guilt and shame on the cross? Why did God choose you and me, of all people, to believe in Jesus and to receive life in his name? How did the Holy Spirit enable us to believe that the Bible really is the Word of God?

Then there are the mysteries that surround the work of the church. Why does the gospel spread faster in one place than in another? What is God’s plan for vast nations of people who still have little or no gospel witness? Why does the persecuted church seem to produce more spiritual fruit than we do? What on earth is God doing?

As we consider such questions, we find ourselves agreeing with the Preacher’s testimony that we “**do not know the work of God who makes everything.**”

IV. Use Every Opportunity to Work (11:6)

Finally, the Preacher commands us to use every opportunity

to work.

When we consider the providence of God, we realize that God is God and we are not. Even though we do not know what God is doing, we are nevertheless called to trust that *God knows* what he is doing.

And so the Preacher concludes with a command in verse 6, **“In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.”**

Some people use the providence of God as an excuse for doing nothing. “God will provide!” Or, “God will save!” they say. And so they do nothing.

But the Preacher does not agree with that approach to life. He affirms that God is sovereign over everything, including all the things we “do not know.” Nevertheless, it is precisely because God is sovereign that he commands us to use every opportunity to work. It is because we do not know what God will prosper that we are to use every opportunity to work.

And this applies not only in the business or economic realm but also in the spiritual realm.

We are to use every opportunity to work for the advancement of the kingdom of God. Live boldly! Live creatively! Be a spiritual entrepreneur! Even if you are not completely sure what will work, try everything you can to serve Christ in a world that desperately needs the gospel. Work from morning till night, making the most of your time by offering God a full day’s work. Then leave the results to him, knowing that he will use your work in whatever way he sees fit.

The Preacher’s practical exhortation to sow good seed is not just for farmers, of course. It applies to many areas of life. The Bible most frequently uses the imagery of sowing and reaping to talk about what we do with the Word of God. Jesus told a famous parable about a farmer who sowed his seed on four different types of soil. When he explained this parable to his disciples, he told them that “the sower sows the word” (Mark 4:14). Of all the things that

we ought to be sowing, therefore, the most important is the living Word of God.

We sow the Word when we read it, study it, memorize it, and meditate on it, listening to the voice of God. We sow the Word when we teach it to our children in Family Worship. We sow the Word when we give someone a Bible. We sow the Word when we share it with others. We sow the Word when we support sound Biblical preaching in our own local church. We sow the Word when we support missionaries and ministries around the world.

There is no single way to invest in the kingdom; the best way is to use our time, talent, and treasure whenever and wherever we can to invest in the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ is the Lord of the harvest, which will come at the proper time. This was true of his own life and ministry. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Jesus was talking about his own death on the cross and burial in the ground, as well as the resurrection that followed. It was not just words that Jesus sowed but his very life itself, when he offered his blood on the cross for our sins. The gospel harvest of his saving work is forgiveness and eternal life for everyone who believes in him. Jesus does not offer his grace in portions to seven, or even to eight, but to every sinner on the face of planet earth.

Now Jesus sends us out to do a little sowing of our own. He is the Lord of the surprising harvest (surprising to us, not to him). We do now always know what God will do with what we sow. But if we keep on sowing, the day will come when God will reap a harvest of salvation.

One example of God’s surprising harvest is the story of Angela that I told you at the start of this sermon. Another example is the conversion of Luke Short at the tender age of 103. Short was sitting under a hedge in Virginia when he happened to remember a

sermon he had once heard preached by the famous Puritan John Flavel. As he recalled the sermon, Short asked God to forgive his sins right then and there, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He lived for three more years, and when he died, the following words were inscribed on his tombstone: “Here lies a babe in grace, aged three years, who died according to nature, aged 106”!

But here is the remarkable part of the story. The sermon that old Mr. Short remembered had been preached *eighty-five* years earlier, back in England! Nearly a century had passed between Flavel’s sermon and Short’s conversion, between the sowing and the reaping.²

So, do not be paralyzed by your lack of knowledge but use every opportunity to work boldly but wisely for the glory of God. Amen.

² See John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963), 11.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. Thank you for the teaching of the Preacher.

Help us not to be paralyzed by our lack of knowledge but to use every opportunity to work boldly but wisely for the glory of God.

Enable us to take action for the sake of the kingdom. Remind us not to be inactive, nor to wait for ideal conditions. Help us to recognize your providence in every area of life, even though we do not always know what you are doing. And let us then take every opportunity to work for the spreading of the gospel.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, do not be paralyzed by your lack of knowledge, but use every opportunity to work boldly but wisely for the glory of God!